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DEPT FOR H AND NEA/MAG
H PLS PASS TO CODEL CARDIN

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL CARDIN

¶1. (U) Summary: Senator Cardin, we look forward to your arrival in Morocco, a long-standing U.S. ally and model in many respects for other Arab, Muslim and African countries. The U.S. mission's goals in Morocco are promoting economic growth, enhancing democracy and governance through political and economic reform, resolving regional conflicts while maintaining close strategic cooperation by promoting U.S.-Moroccan partnership in diplomacy, military engagement and countering terrorism. Morocco itself is undergoing far-reaching transformations, albeit unevenly, addressing economic development, political reform, gender equality and religious tolerance. Morocco has made strides in freedom of the press and remains a leader in the region, but those who cross redlines still face jail and/or the closure of their offices. Other human rights have grown as well, although Morocco remains very much under the control of a monarchy. Morocco's top foreign policy priority is winning U.S. and other countries' support for its position on the Western Sahara territorial dispute and for North African integration. A bumper crop in 2009 buttressed growth against the backdrop of reduced exports, lower investment and declining remittances. Thus, despite the global economic crisis Morocco's economy grew by over five percent in 2009. Slums are coming down and so is unemployment. We believe expanding Morocco's economic base will do as much to address popular dissatisfaction with the political system as will strengthening democratic institutions. End Summary.

Government and Political Reform

¶2. (SBU) Government: Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi's government, formed after the September 2007 legislative elections, represents a three-party coalition. On January 4, King Mohammed VI appointed five new ministers, the second cabinet reshuffle in six months. The new ministers are Minister of Interior, Minister of Justice, Minister of Tourism, Minister in Charge of Relations with the Parliament, and Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister in Charge of Modernizing Public Sectors. The changes at Interior and Justice were significant and will potentially impact major Moroccan initiatives including regionalization, judicial reform and Western Sahara policy. The way in which the King imposed the changes on a weak government does not necessarily represent a step forward in the democratization process.

¶3. (SBU) At the same time, internal democracy is growing within political parties. A political formation founded by Fouad Ali El Himma, an intimate of the King, has evolved into a new Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) by grouping several smaller parties. It now constitutes the largest political bloc in Parliament, and could lead should the current coalition falter. In addition to the PAM, the leading parties are El Fassi's Istiqlal, the

Islamist-referent Party of Justice and Development (PJD), the pro-Berber Popular Movement (MP), the National Rally of Independents (RNI) and the Socialist USFP, which has seen its support decline steadily since 2007.

¶4. (SBU) Parliamentary Reform: Despite the emergence of the PAM and the increasingly democratic internal structures of the parties, we currently see no prospect for a significant shift in Morocco's foreign and security policies, nor in the way in which policy is formulated. Neither Parliament nor the Prime Minister has much say in these issues, which the King manages directly with the concerned ministries. Morocco's political parties and the bicameral parliament are weak and structurally hamstrung from taking legislative initiatives or strongly articulating dissent. Changing the Constitution would be necessary in order to change the power imbalance, but both Parliament and parties will have to improve their capacity and performance first. Nonetheless, the parties and Parliament have made some technical improvements, largely thanks to USG-funded programs from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the State University of New York (SUNY), which have modestly improved the body's administrative capacity. These include establishment of a budget analysis office, a verbatim transcription service, a consistent forum for training and debate among parliamentary members and staff, and the introduction of question time. This innovation has required the Government to answer over 2,800 questions in the last two years, with the PAM posing over 1,000, and focusing on the work of the Ministries of Interior, Education, Health, Agriculture, Transport, Employment, Justice and Communications, in that order.

¶5. (U) Political Reform: Although the September 2007 parliamentary elections were the most transparent in the country's history, record low participation (37 percent of registered voters) reflected the lack of voter confidence in the institution. Despite this challenge, the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funded NDI to run the first ever international election observation in Morocco. MEPI also supported an ambitious training program for women running for municipal councils in June after a quota was established reserving 12 percent of the seats for women. Voter turnout in the June municipal elections was approximately 54 percent, and women captured nearly 13 percent of the seats, exceeding the number reserved for them. The USG had also sponsored the training of over 3,500 women via an unusual collaborative project between the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI). The entry into politics of over 3,000 elected women office holders and many thousands more candidates may have a potentially transformational impact.

Social Reform

¶6. (U) Human and Women's Rights: King Mohammed VI has embarked on a determined and continuous program of human rights reforms that include the Arab world's first truth commission and a revised Family Code (Moudawana), granting expanded legal rights to women, growing government transparency, accountability and rule of law. Palace support has produced more elected women officials than in any other Arab country. Women now serve as policymakers and religious leaders, instructing women about their new-found legal rights, and advocating a more moderate view of Islam. Although Morocco has become the leader of reform in the region, the reforms are still not deeply rooted in law, tradition or the Constitution and could be rolled back. Continued support and encouragement from partners like the United States and Europe are essential. Another recent development has been the expansion of cultural rights and outlets for Berbers, one of the largest groups in Morocco and perhaps the largest.

¶7. (U) Religious Freedom: The Moroccan Constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion, although Islam is the official state religion. The GOM tolerates

several small religious minorities but prohibits the distribution of non-Muslim religious materials and bans all proselytizing. It also occasionally restricts Islamic organizations whose activities have exceeded the bounds of "acceptable religious practice" and become political in nature, lately targeting Shi'a. Morocco has become protective of and even positive toward the tiny remnant of its once substantial Jewish minority.

¶8. (U) Social Reform: Morocco benefits from several MEPI programs, including country-specific projects and inclusion in regional efforts. Recent and ongoing programs include the above-mentioned program for women candidates, breast cancer awareness, sustaining civil society and youth associations, developing freedom of expression via the Internet, supporting development of democratic leaders, supporting technical assistance to meet environmental obligations under the FTA, political party training and capacity building, and the Financial Services Volunteer Corps, efforts to expand access to banking and to venture capital. Other USG-funded projects support anti-corruption efforts (with the American Bar Association) and prison reform to undermine the foundations of extremism.

¶9. (SBU) Recent Developments: Over the past several months, there have been some setbacks on the human rights front. The Aminatou Haidar case represented an extreme example of the difficulties those Moroccans who advocate the independence of Western Sahara or the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people face when they seek to express their views publicly either domestically or internationally. On November 13, the GOM refused to allow Haidar, a prominent Sahrawi pro-independence activist and human rights defender, to enter Morocco, confiscated her passport after she began the process of renouncing her Moroccan citizenship and sent her to the Canary Islands. Once there, she embarked on a 34-day hunger strike until the GOM relented and allowed her to return on December 18. The case attracted significant international attention and widespread accusations that the GOM had come dangerously close to forced exile. Likewise, there have been several recent incidents of limitations on the free press, including court cases in which journalists and bloggers have been sentenced to jail terms. Most recently, the GOM shut down the French language weekly publication "Le Journal," ostensibly over non-payment of taxes, in a move widely seen as the latest effort to rein in the independent media.

Regional Security Issues

¶10. (U) Algeria: Moroccan foreign policy is dominated by defending and seeking international recognition of its sovereignty claims over Western Sahara. The issue remains the most visible source of tension with long-time rival Algeria, which has historically supported the POLISARIO Front's quest for independence by way of an UN-sponsored referendum. Algeria closed the border between the two countries, and it remains closed. While the King and other GOM officials have publicly proposed opening the border and upgrading bilateral relations between the two countries, their entreaties have been repeatedly rebuffed. The Government of Algeria (GOA) has linked progress on the border to all issues, particularly the Western Sahara. The issue led Morocco to leave the African Union and has been an obstacle to regional integration through the Arab Maghreb Union.

¶11. (SBU) Western Sahara: In April 2007, Morocco proposed a new autonomy plan for Western Sahara, and a series of UN-sponsored negotiations with the POLISARIO have taken place in Manhasset, New York. The Moroccan proposal would provide Sahrawis, the indigenous people of Western Sahara, autonomy in administering local affairs under Moroccan sovereignty. In April, the UN renewed the mandate of the UN peacekeeping operation MINURSO until 2010. Following the controversial lapsing of the contract of the former UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy, the UN selected retired U.S. Ambassador

Christopher Ross to be the new Personal Envoy, and he made his first visit to the region in February 2009 and his second in July. He hosted informal talks near Vienna in August; while they produced no breakthroughs, the parties agreed to continue negotiations. The next round of informal talks is scheduled to take place February 10-11, 2010, in New York.

¶12. (U) Western Sahara Continued: Western Sahara experienced gross violations of human rights from 1975 until the end of King Hassan II's regime, and repression intensified after the short-lived Sahrawi uprising of 2005. Since late 2006, Morocco has improved the human rights situation in the territory. Arbitrary arrests have sharply diminished and beatings and physical abuse by security forces have all but disappeared. However, dissenters still face harassment and sometimes even criminal charges if they publish or speak too publicly in support of independence or on a vote for self-determination.

Economic Development and U.S. Assistance

¶13. (U) The economy is relatively healthy, although marred by disparities in wealth. Moroccan authorities are concerned, however, by the impact of the global recession on important export, tourism and remittance earnings. Growth is expected to continue, despite the global economic slowdown, thanks to a record agricultural harvest in 2009. Since implementation of our Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on January 1, 2006, bilateral commerce has more than doubled. A number of U.S. firms have increased their investment in Morocco, seeing new markets develop as a result of the FTA. The Department of Commerce's Commercial Law Development Program and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency conduct capacity building and technical assistance projects to assist Morocco.

Both agencies help the Kingdom to create an open and transparent trading environment and to fully develop its trading potential. However, significant export growth to U.S. and other markets will also depend on Morocco's ability to capture a larger share of value added in its export products.

¶14. (U) Millennium Challenge Account: In 2007, building on decades of USAID and Peace Corps efforts, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) signed a five-year, USD 697.5 million Millennium Challenge Account Compact with Morocco in order to reduce poverty and increase economic growth. Currently, through the MCC the USG is advancing programs in Fruit Tree Productivity to stimulate growth in the agricultural sector and reduce volatility of agricultural production. It is also working on an Artisanal Fisheries Program to modernize the means of catching, storing and marketing fish, thereby improving the quality of the catch, maintaining the value chain, and increasing fishermen's access to both local and export markets. It seeks to stimulate growth by leveraging the links between the craft sector, tourism and the Fes Medina's cultural, historic and architectural resources. The Compact will also increase financial services for micro-enterprises in Morocco by addressing key constraints to the development of the broader, market-based financial sector. Moreover, it will help reduce high unemployment among young graduates and encourage a more entrepreneurial culture through two existing Moroccan government initiatives, Moukalawati (a program for supporting small businesses) and the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a framework of efforts aimed at creating opportunities for the poor, vulnerable and socially excluded. Finally, the program is investing approximately USD 40 million in functional literacy.

Military and Counterterrorism Cooperation

¶15. (U) Military Cooperation: The GOM has been formally invited to participate in the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI). Under the GPOI program, the U.S. intends

to provide peace operations training and other support to the Moroccan military so that it can continue to develop and sustain peace operations capacity. The current plan is to provide training and facilities refurbishment to a peace operations training center in Morocco. In order to ensure long-term sustainability, the GPOI program incorporates train-the-trainer elements into its training events. The Mission is working with the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, which will coordinate Morocco's GPOI request, to finalize the program. In addition, the Embassy is currently engaged in negotiations with the GOM on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).

¶16. (U) Military Cooperation Continued: The Moroccan military has undertaken a sweeping effort to modernize a military force that fields predominantly Korean and Vietnam War-era equipment. While F-16 and T-6 sales form the bulk of the dollar figure for this modernization, the total Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Financing portfolio totals some 120 cases in excess of USD 3 billion. Military modernization further strengthens the Moroccan military by continuing and expanding exposure to U.S. doctrine, tactics, techniques, procedures and personnel. The expanded requirement to train operators and maintenance staff for the F-16 and T-6 aircraft alone will practically equal the current annual training allocation for all Moroccan personnel across all the services and government organizations. Moreover, the integration of a fourth generation fighter into the Royal Moroccan Air Force will stimulate a full spectrum modernization approach from operating and sustaining such aircraft, maintaining facilities, logistics and aerial deployment to command and control. This provides an unparalleled opportunity to shape our engagement with the Royal Moroccan Air Force. A superb boost this year was the selection of Morocco to participate in the Chief of Staff of the Air Force Counterpart Visit program, as well as Morocco's decision to send an observer to AMC's Airlift Rodeo. These engagement activities add to a robust exercise program that includes AFRICAN LION, PHOENIX EXPRESS, SAHARAN WIND, AFRICAN PARTNERSHIP STATION, AFRICAN ENDEAVOR and FLINTLOCK, in addition to at least two annual Joint Combined Exercise and Training activities (JCETs).

¶17. (SBU) Counterterrorism: The terrorist threat in Morocco emanates especially from small grassroots radical Islamic cells, which have shown some capacity to attack. In 2008, security forces disrupted six terrorist and foreign fighter cells, prosecuting 100 people. In 2009, the security services disrupted five terrorist and foreign-fighter cells totaling 50 people, including one group of 24 who were detained in September. The biggest threat is that attacks could deter tourism, an important component of the economy. The GOM's implementation of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy emphasizing vigilant security measures, counter-radicalization policies, and robust international cooperation has been largely successful in containing the threat. Economic disruption, whether from attacks or the global economic crisis, remains the principal threat to stability here, but most observers believe Morocco will manage to contain the threat.

¶18. (U) Counterterrorism Continued: In early-October, a multi-agency mission team participated in two days of wide-ranging, frank discussions with representatives of the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior. Those discussions addressed issues including counterterrorism, trafficking in persons, illegal migration, drug trafficking/counternarcotics, regional threats and stability, human rights and assistance/development efforts. Designed as a strategy session to share information and lay the groundwork for future engagement, both sides agreed that the talks were useful and could lead to substantive programmatic and other collaboration. Under the King who as "Commander of the Faithful" leads Moroccan Muslims and Jews, Morocco has standardized religious doctrine, consolidated control over religious schools and sent specially trained imams to Europe to preach moderate messages to the Moroccan Diaspora. The vast majority of Morocco's population rejects Salafist and

Wahhabist approaches to Islam and does not support terrorist groups.

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